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ABSTRACT

Based on data drawn from a survey of English department chairpersons, a profile was constructed of the typical two-year college in the southeastern United States in its teaching of American literature. The data revealed that the typical school had a small number of students enrolled in American literature survey courses and that teachers tended to be traditional in their methods of course organization and conservative in their use of a syllabus. The course offered at a typical two-year school contrasted with that offered at near-by four-year schools in several respects, including testing; yet, in the overall picture, these differences were rather minor. The two types of schools agreed on which values should be stressed and on which texts should be used and no differences were found in the institutional goals of the two types of schools. Comments from teachers at the two-year schools showed that they were concerned about the image of the American literature survey and of their schools; however, they did not agree on where the program in American literature stands in relation to programs offered in four-year schools. (FL)

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AMERICAN LITERATURE AS IT IS TAUGHT: A REPORT OF A REGIONAL AND NATIONAL SURVEY OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

David Tomlinson, U. S. Naval Academy

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AMERICAN LITERATURE AS IT IS TAUGHT: A REPORT OF A REGIONAL AND NATIONAL SURVEY OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

David Tomlinson, U. S. Naval Academy

Eltse Carter and I sat down for a chat one autumn day in 1977, expecting to talk about teaching in a rather aimless fashion, in the same way we had done for a half dozen years. What whisked us away from the usual conversational pleasantries was considering how American literature should be taught and how it was being taught. The "should be" was no problem for us. It was a matter of judgment, and our judgments largely coincided. Actual practice was a different matter. We knew what we did; but our ideas of how others taught were, we realized, largely matters of conjecture. We were interested in comprehensive answers to a host of questions: Do college teachers generally used the same methods in teaching American literature? Which textbooks do they use? Do they organize their courses in the same ways? Do two-year and four-year schools differ in any significant ways when they offer similar courses?

We surprised even ourselves in the persistence of our curiosity. A year after the first questions had been raised, we had devised, revised, and tested a questionnaire. When the 1978 MLA Directory arrived, we selected the names of English Department Chairmen at random from the lists and sent them our four-part questionnaire.[1] Dr. Richard Pollak of the Academic Computing Center at the Naval Academy helped us record and analyze the data that came back to us, using the standard programs of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

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[1]Special assistance in these procedures came from Mrs. Virginia Wilner of the Humanities Division at Northern Virginia Community College and from Mrs. Barbara Rutledge and her staff in the English Department at the Naval Academy. Ms. Debbie Queen of the Naval Academy's English and History Division proved invaluable in readying materials for computerization.

While the survey was a national poll of colleges and universities, we want to present some of the findings as they relate to the ten-state SAMLA region and, more particularly, to the two-year college in the region.

I. The American Literature Survey Course

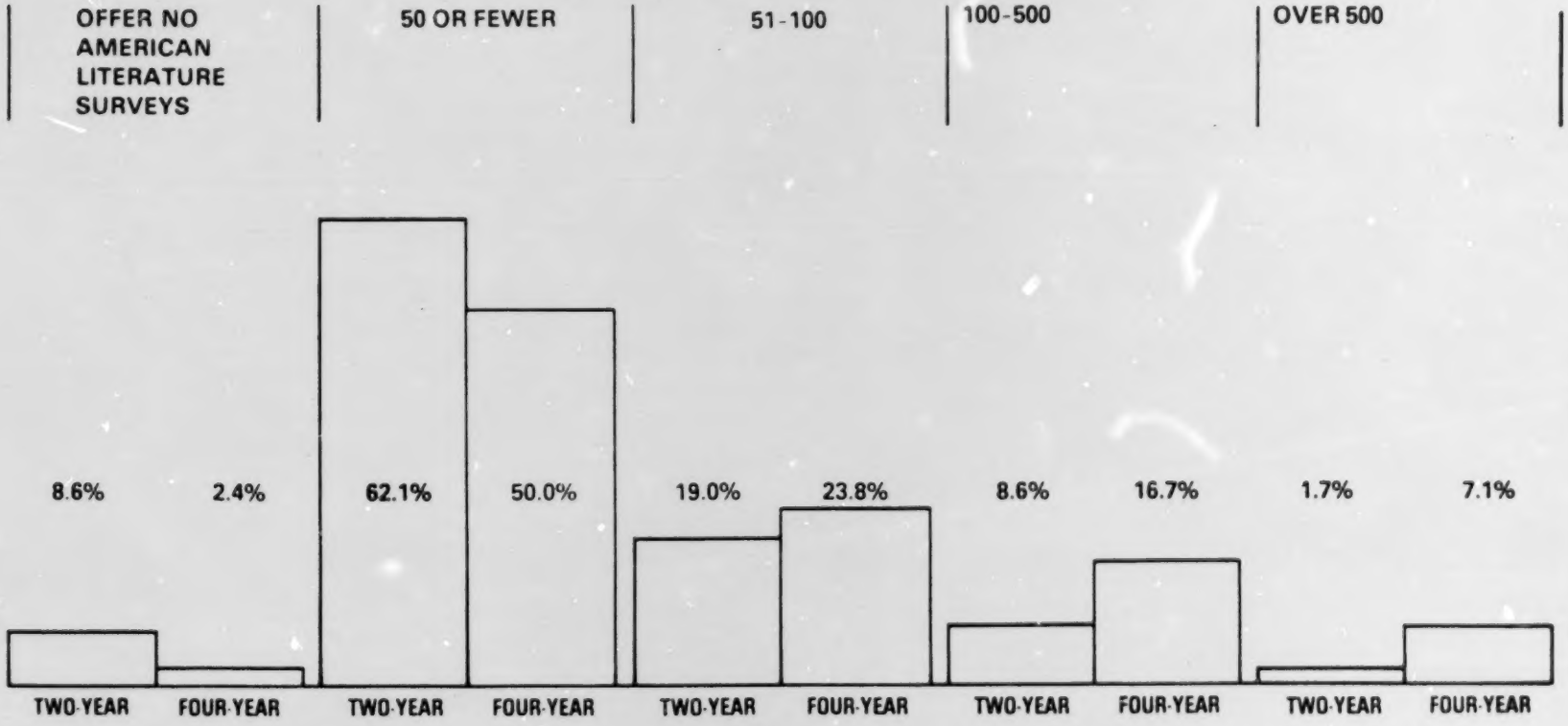
Two-year schools in our region are somewhat less likely to include American literature survey courses in their curricula than are their four-year counterparts. (Fig. 1 -- "Total Enrollments in American Literature Survey Courses Each Term"). Those junior and community colleges without such courses, both in the SAMLA region and around the nation, frequently offered one of three reasons for the gap in their offerings: (1) "College enrollment has remained low and the offering is not deemed feasible;" (2) students have shown no interest in such a course; or (3) "our students do not have sufficient command of the language of literature to make the courses profitable -- for them or the instructors."

The highest percentage of regional two-year schools (62.1%) reported small programs, enrolling fewer than fifty students per term. There are also numerous small senior college programs. Half of all the programs reported in the SAMLA region enroll fewer than fifty students; but there are also some rather large colleges and universities in the region, and these draw a proportionally larger numbers of students to their American literature courses, something the graph shows clearly in the percentage of four-year schools enrolling more than one hundred students per term.

Figure 1

TOTAL ENROLLMENTS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE SURVEY COURSES EACH TERM

TWO AND FOUR-YEAR SCHOOLS – SAMLA REGION



II. Course Organization

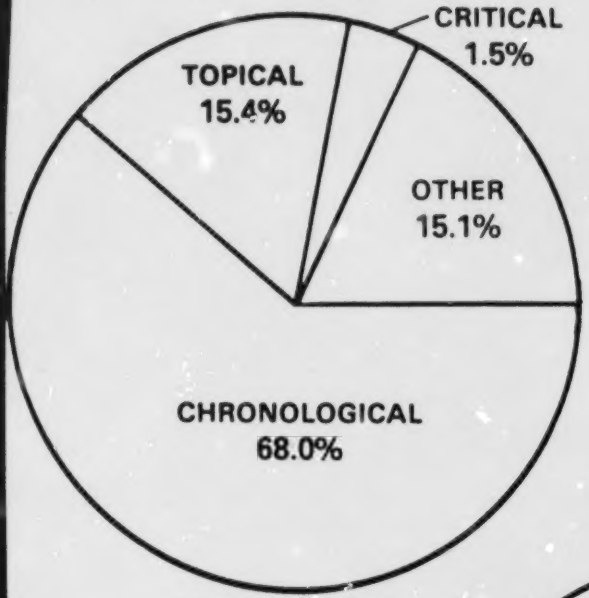
Teachers in two-year schools in the South Atlantic region tend to be less experimental in their methods of course organization than their contemporaries in two-year schools outside the region or even than those in the total pool of two-year and four-year schools nationwide. (Fig. 2 -- "Methods of Course Organization"). Most teachers in all regions and in all schools find the chronological method of course organization the most natural and the best for an American literature survey course; but the percentage who proceed in that fashion is even higher in SAMLA two-year schools (77.4%) than elsewhere. The most striking contrast otherwise is in the preference for the topical approach. More than twice as high a percentage of teachers nationwide and more than three times a percentage of those in two-year schools ourside the region reported using it than did teachers inside the ten-state region.

Two-year college teachers in the region also expressed their preference for the stable, the tried, and the true in their championing of the course syllabus. (Fig. 3 -- "Do You Issue a Syllabus?") More than 90% of the schools in the SAMLA region issue such course guides compared to 82.4% of all schools nationwide. Within the region, the two-year schools are more assiduous than the four-year institutions in following this practice. The real contrast, however is between two-year SAMLA region schools and two-year schools outside the region. There is a difference of almost 25% in the use of the syllabus.

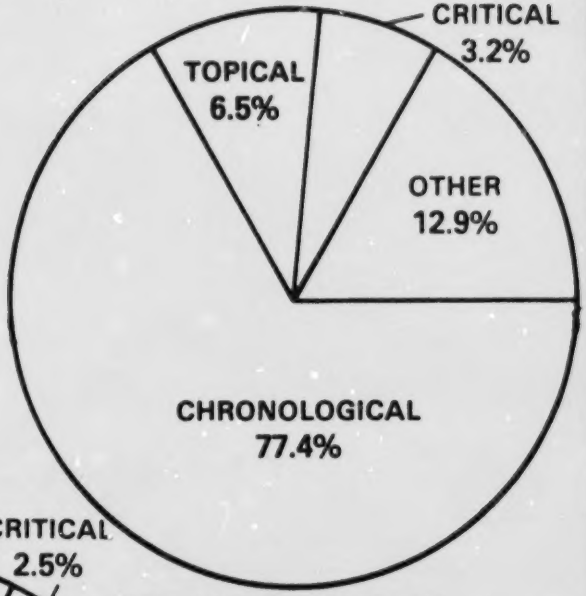
How do values emphasized in the syllabus correlate with those emphasized in class? (Fig. 4--"Correlation of Syllabus with Emphasized Values").

Figure 2

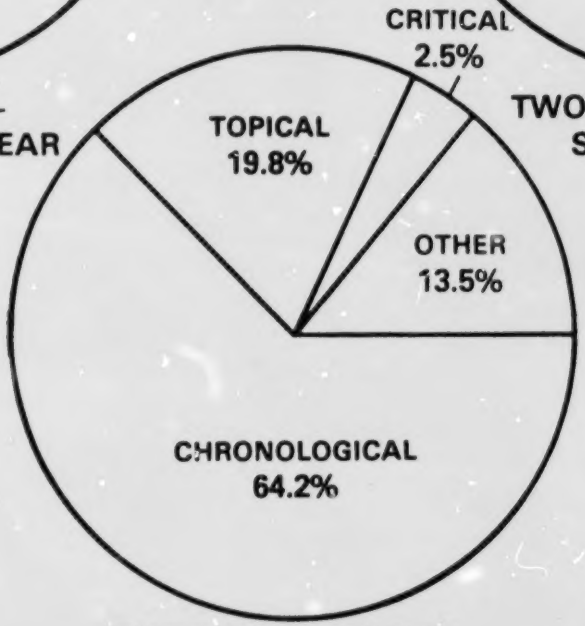
METHODS OF COURSE ORGANIZATION



NATIONWIDE — TWO AND FOUR-YEAR SCHOOLS



TWO-YEAR SCHOOLS — SAMLA REGION



TWO-YEAR SCHOOLS — OUTSIDE SAMLA REGION

Figure 3

DO YOU ISSUE A SYLLABUS?

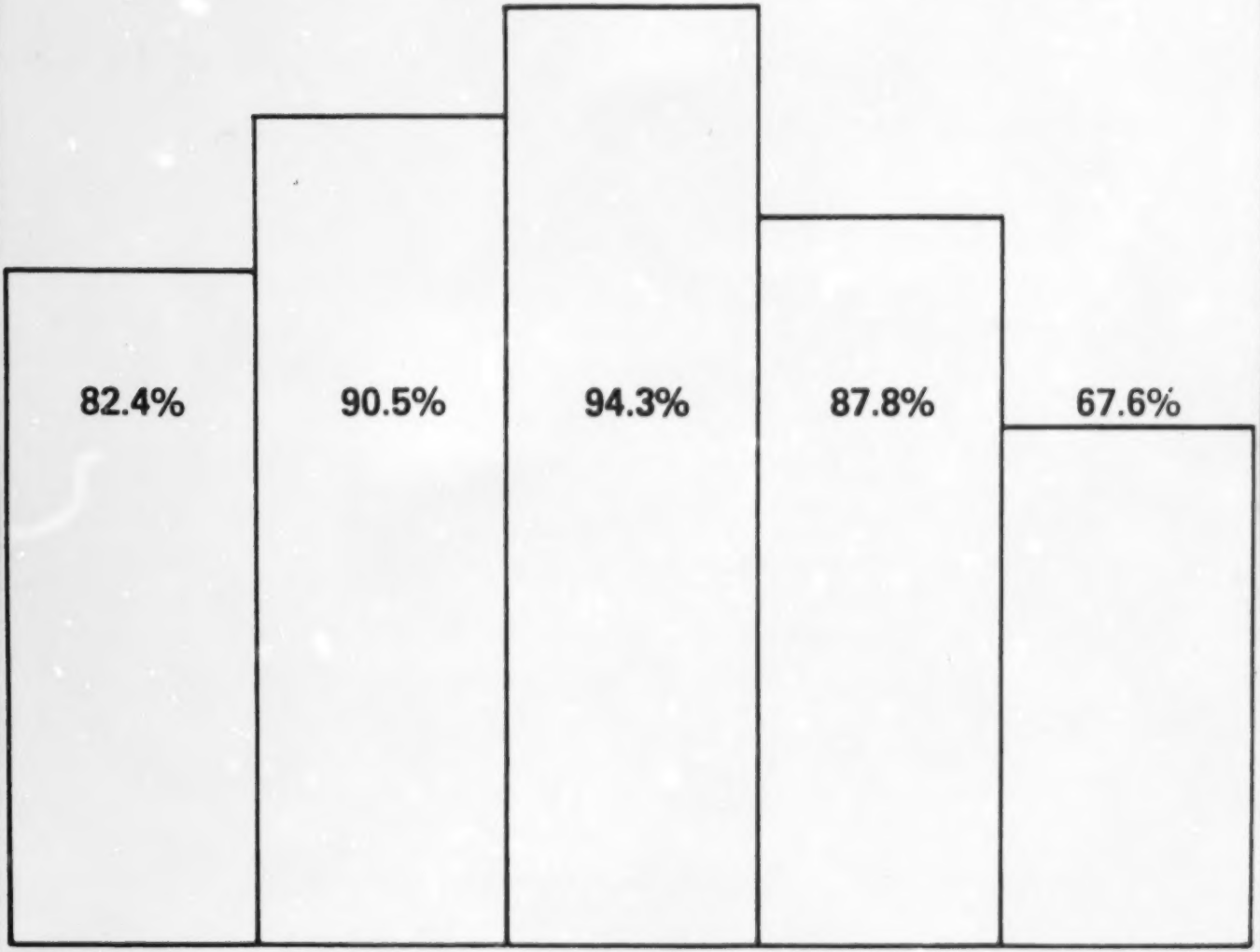
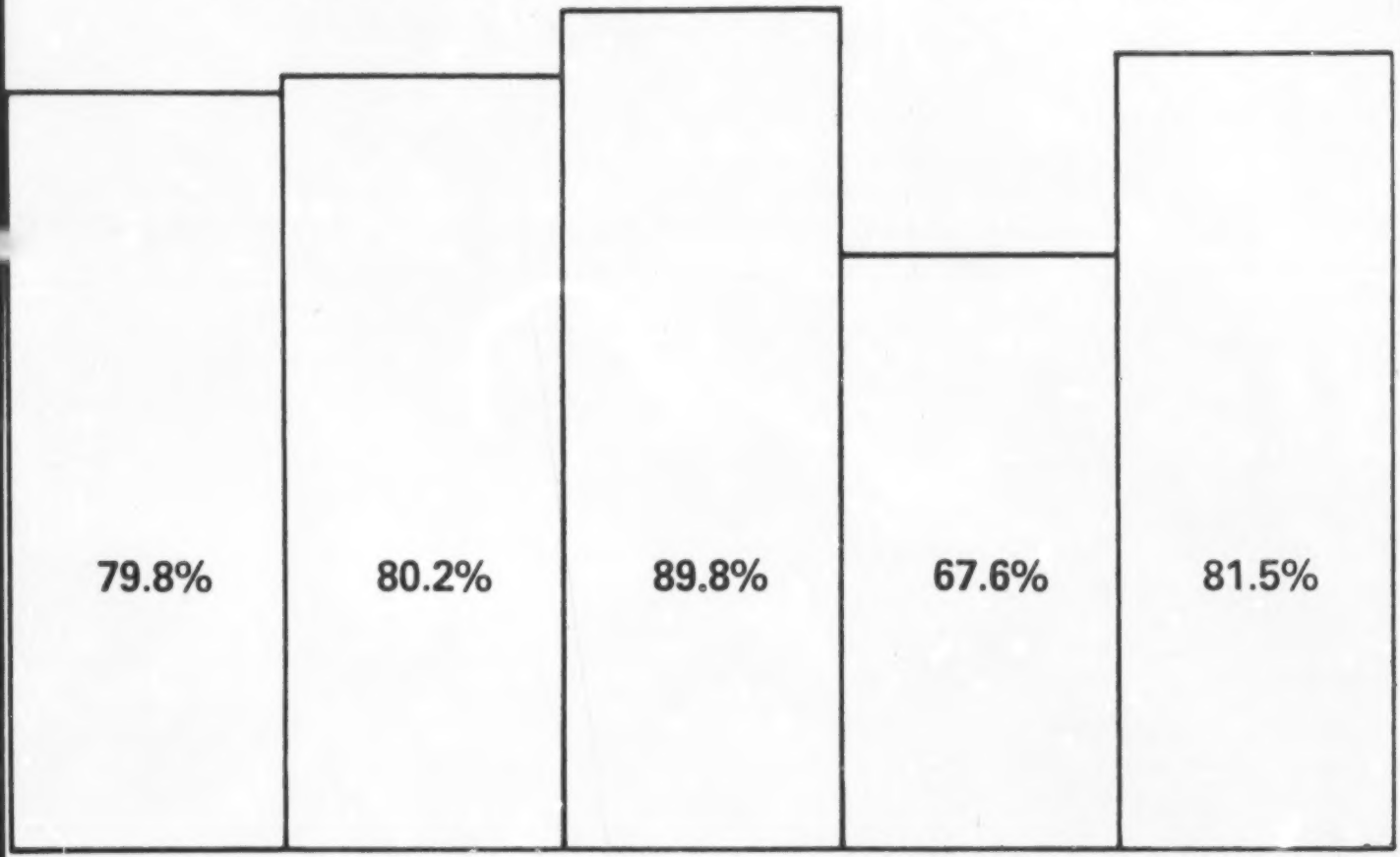


Figure 4

CORRELATION OF SYLLABUS WITH EMPHASIZED VALUES



Most of those issuing a syllabus found some correlation, but fewer (81.5%) of the two-year schools outside the region found a positive correlation than did those inside (89.8%); while the deepest contrast is between regional two-year schools and regional four-year schools, which were separated by 22.2 percentage points. The difference might well spring from a difference in philosophy, four-year schools generally issuing a syllabus which guides the student's reading but is somewhat independent of the classroom offering and junior and community colleges using it to reinforce and reiterate course goals and objectives.

What values did teachers report emphasizing in their teaching of American literature? Let me tell you about the first two choices of those in two-year schools in the region. (Fig. 5 -- "What Values Do Teachers Emphasize? First Choice"). Most teachers see the understanding of literary works themselves as of primary importance. There was no other value which was a close contender. There was, however, less unanimity about naming the second most important value. (Fig. 6 --"What Values Do Teachers Emphasize? Second Choice"). American literary history, literary values, and a correct understanding of literary values gained roughly equal numbers of adherents, while a large number of teachers suggested other values than those named were important to them.

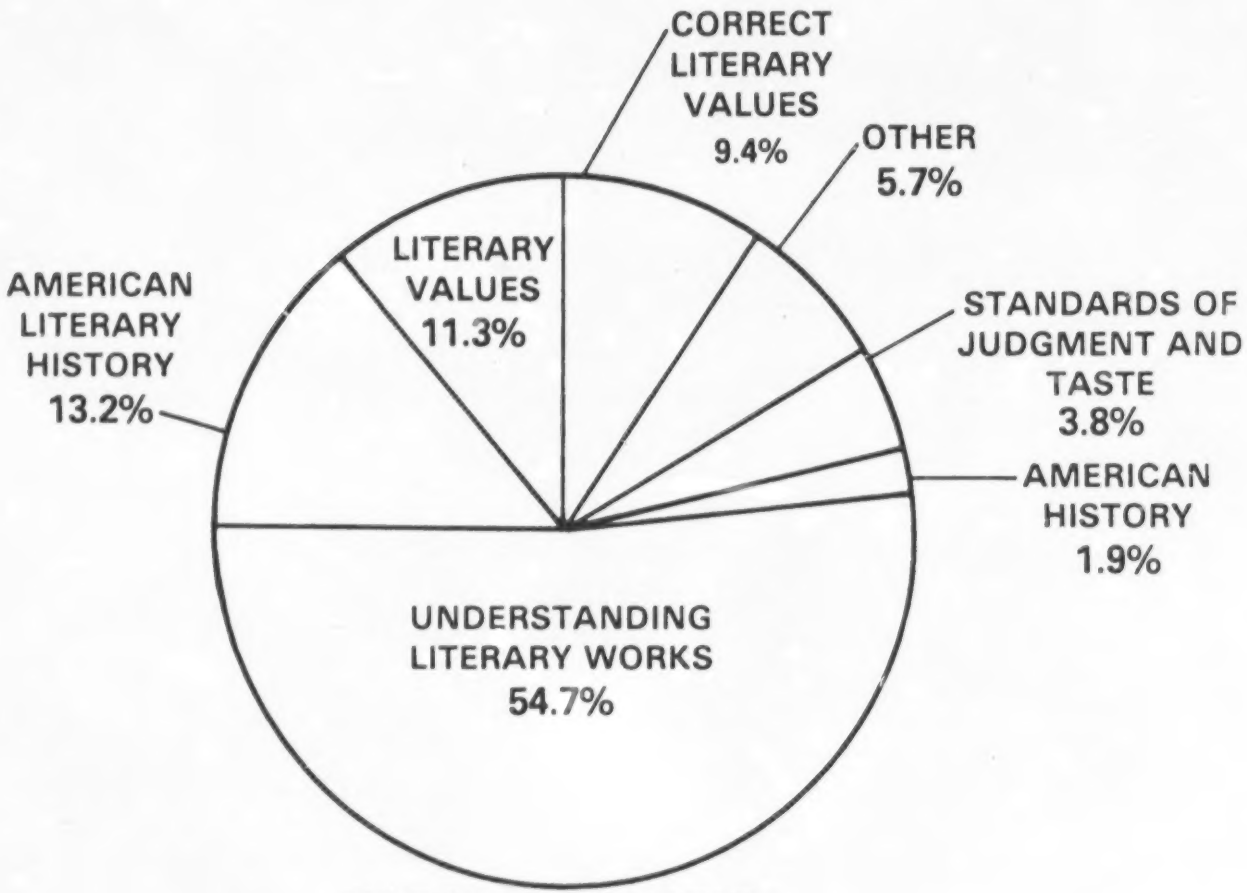
III. In the Classroom

How does a teacher try to convey those values he has chosen to emphasize? In another day, not terribly remote, he might have lectured formally or subjected his class to the rigors of a formal recitation. (Fig. 7 --

Figure 5

WHAT VALUES DO TEACHERS EMPHASIZE?

FIRST CHOICE

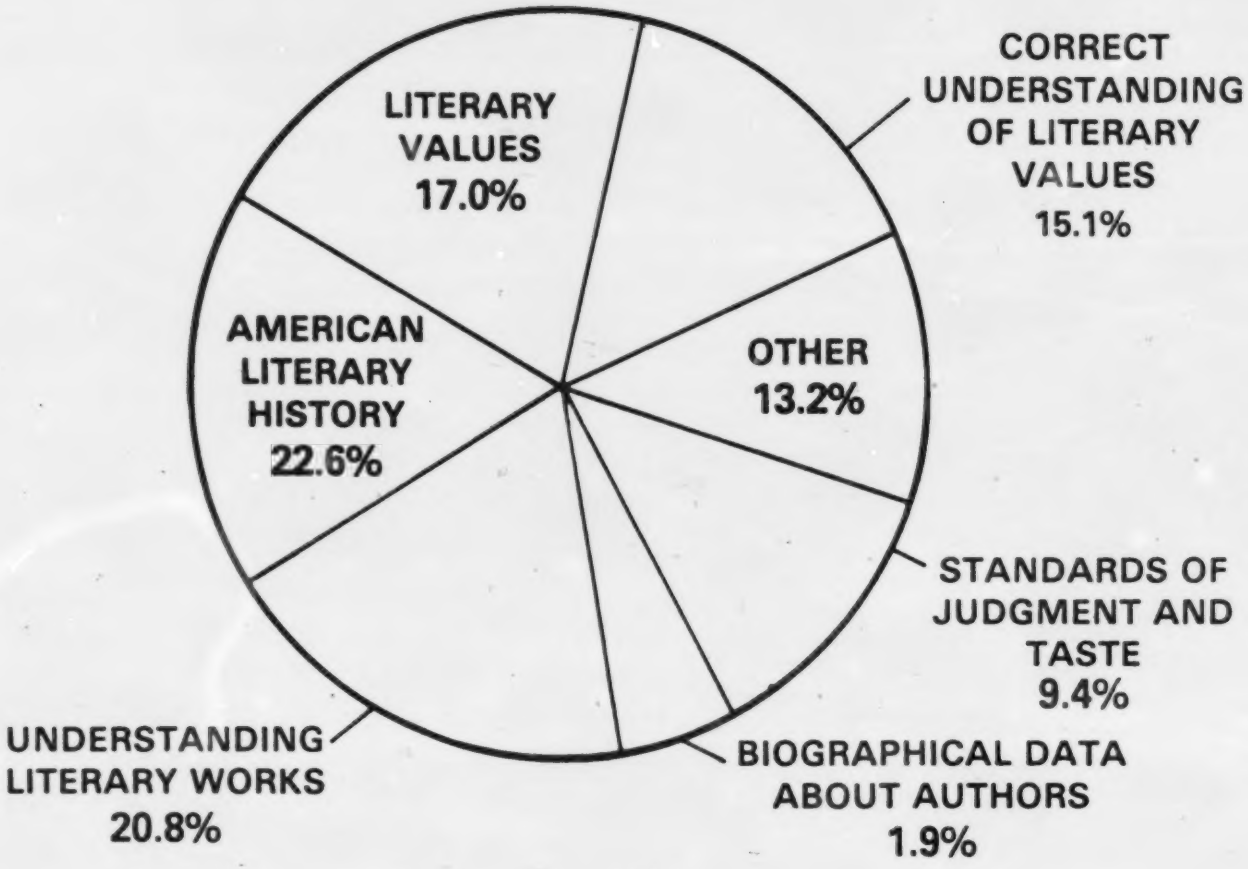


TWO-YEAR SCHOOLS –
SAMLA REGION

Figure 6

WHAT VALUES DO TEACHERS EMPHASIZE?

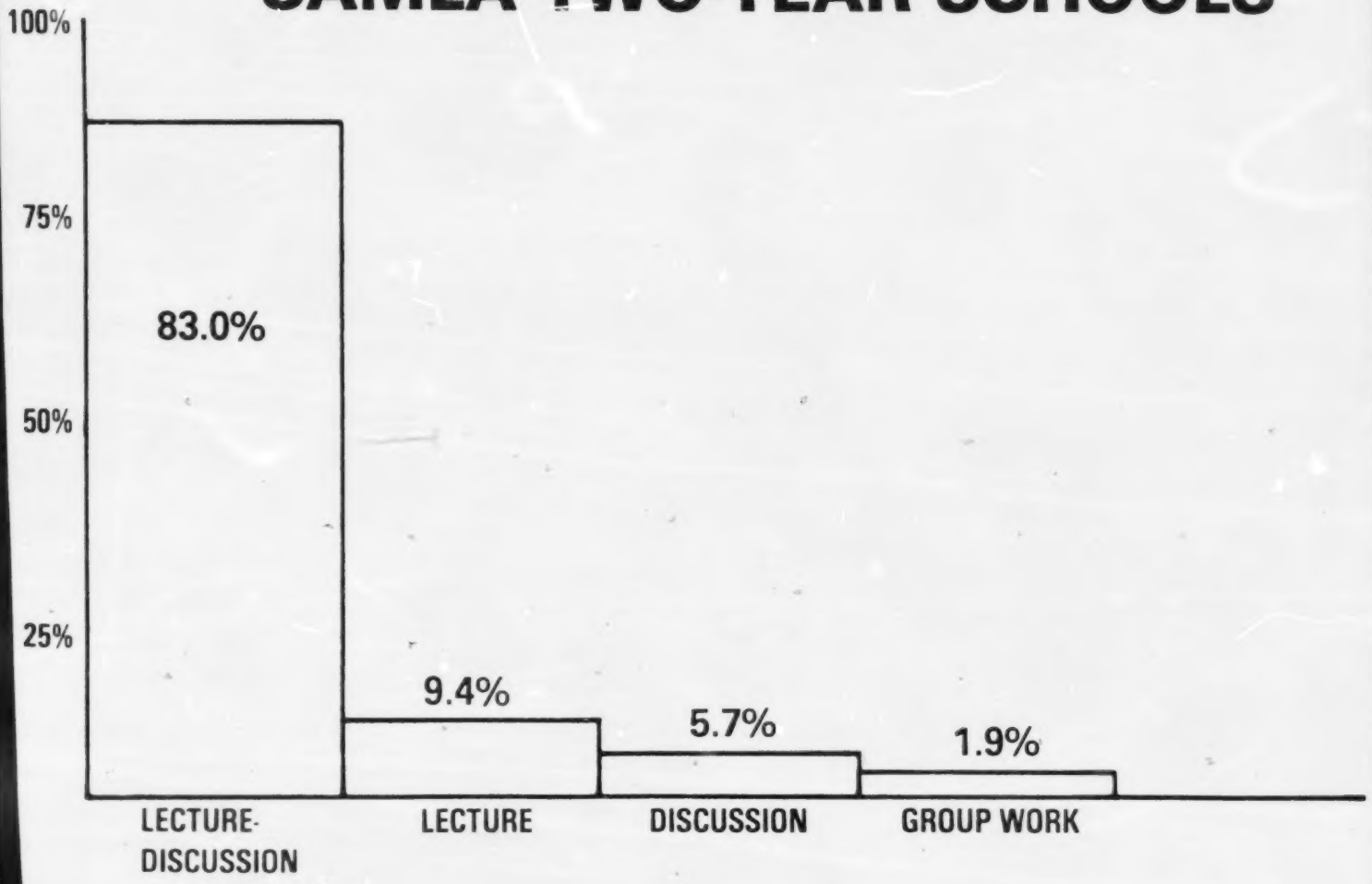
SECOND CHOICE


LITERARY VALUES 17.0%
CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF LITERARY VALUES 15.1%
AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY 22.6%
OTHER 13.2%
STANDARDS OF JUDGMENT AND TASTE 9.4%
UNDERSTANDING LITERARY WORKS 20.8%
BIOGRAPHICAL DATA ABOUT AUTHORS 1.9%

TWO-YEAR SCHOOLS –
SAMLA REGION

Figure 7

HOW CLASSROOM TIME IS SPENT – SAMLA TWO-YEAR SCHOOLS

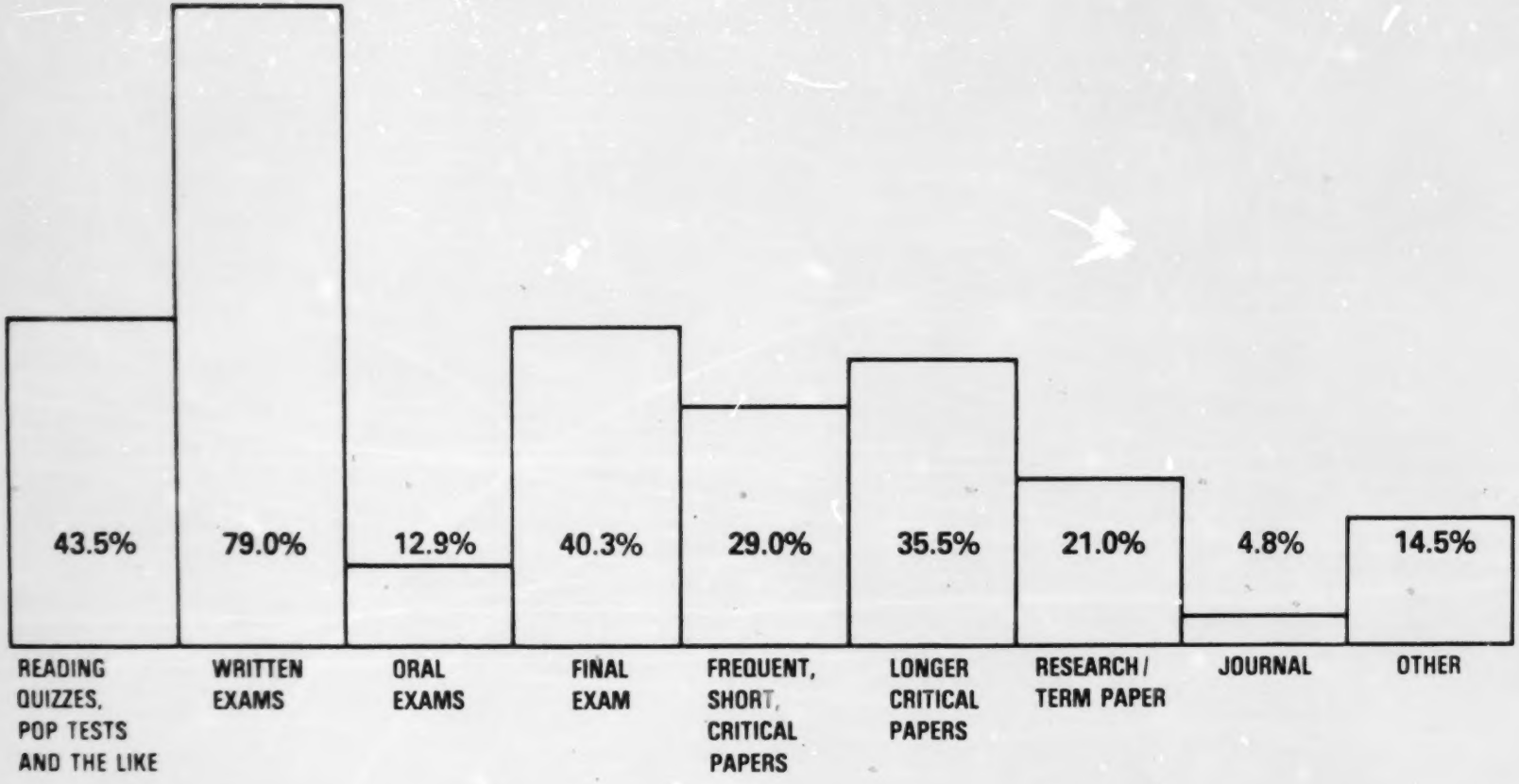


"How Classroom Time is Spent -- SAMLA Two-Year Schools). Those forms have all but been replaced by the hybrid lecture-discussion, a mixed method which allows the professor to move with ease from giving information to answering questions or asking them. A few two-year college professors still use the lecture exclusively (9.4%), and some more experimental and bold souls teach by discussion alone (5.7%) or by assigning group work (1.9%); but more than four of every five of us find lecture-discussion the practicable method.

What kinds of work do we require of our students? The written examination proved to be the most popular. (Fig. 8 -- "Demonstrations of Knowledge, Two-Year Schools -- SAMLA Region"). Among junior and community college professors in the region, 79% indicated they depended in some way on such exams; but the percentage of four-year college teachers using that tool was even higher -- 92.9%. There was an even greater split between two-year and four-year institutions over the practice of giving a comprehensive final examination; 40.3% of the teachers in two-year schools in the region reported giving one, while 71.4% -- more than thirty per cent more -- of the senior college teachers relied upon this tool. Indeed, for reasons which have not been explored, four-year college teachers in the region required more varied demonstrations of knowledge from their students than did their counterparts in community and junior colleges. As you can see, the reading quiz, critical papers -- both long and short -- and research papers are all used frequently by two-year college teachers to measure achievement. Oral exams and journals find less favor.

Figure 8

DEMONSTRATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE
TWO-YEAR SCHOOLS — SAMLA REGION



IV. Choosing Curriculum Materials

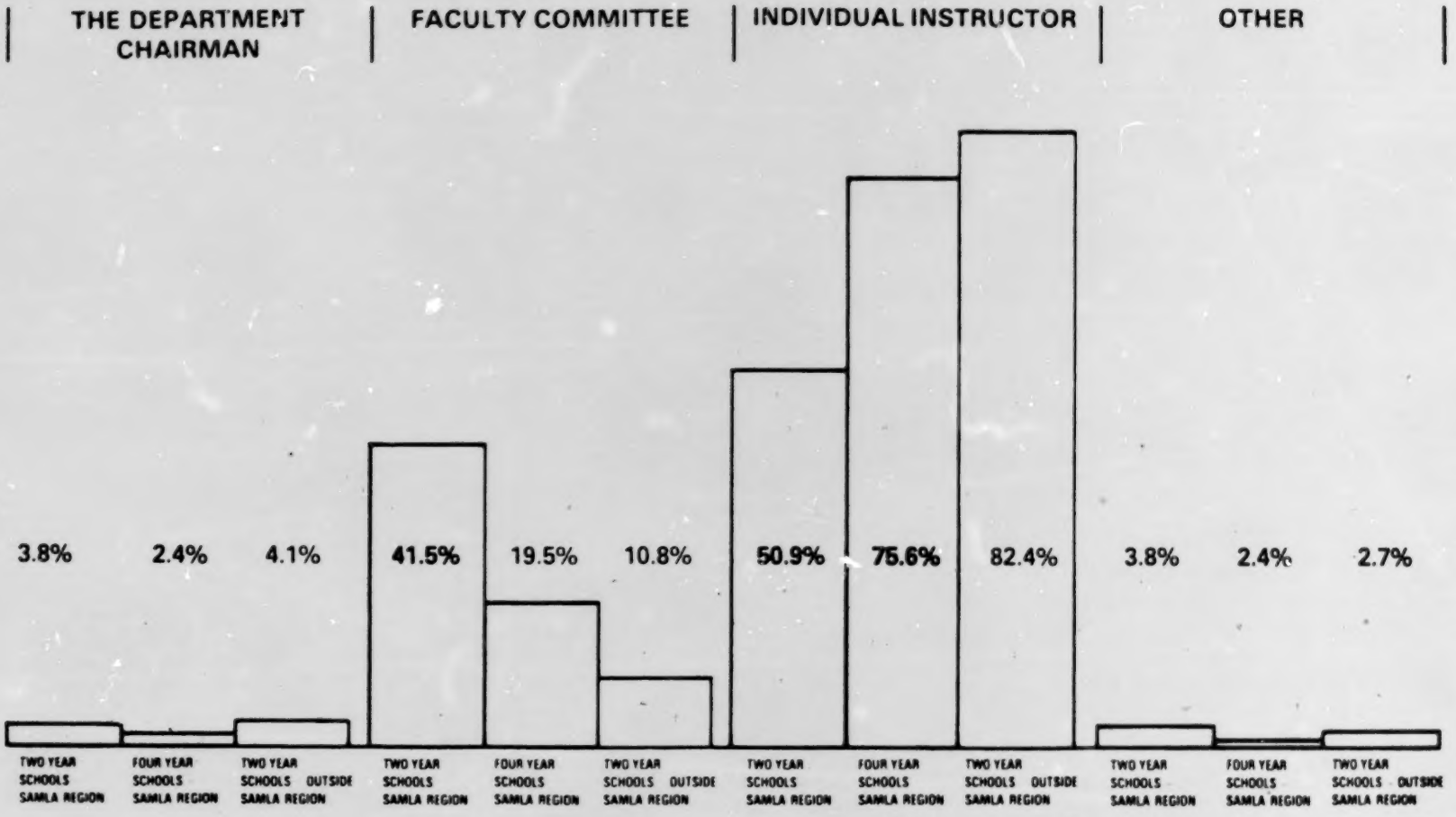
Who chooses the materials a teacher teaches? (Fig. 9 -- "Who Chooses the Text?") There is no single answer to the question; but we learned that in two-year colleges in the SAMLA region adoptions tend to be made by faculty committees (41.5% of the time) more frequently than is the case either in four-year schools in the region or in two-year schools outside the ten-state area. Conversely, other institutions place a much higher premium on having individual instructors choose their texts. Only slightly more than half (50.9%) of the two-year colleges in the region allow instructors to make that choice for themselves, while more than three-quarters (75.6%) of the four year schools permit it; and better than four-fifths (82.4%) of the two-year schools outside the region allow an instructor such a choice.

Of those individuals from regional two-year colleges who do choose their own texts, 64.5% named the inclusion of representative classics as an important factor in their choice, while 48.4% found readability and 37.1% rated cost as important factors. Currency of material (27.4%), the inclusion of minority literatures (25.8%), and the easy availability of the text (21%) also concerned sizeable numbers of teachers. Of least importance to them was the book's apparatus, those helps for students and teachers which book salesmen seem to think gives their product the edge.

The shocker came when we tabulated the answer to the question: "What text are you currently using in your American literature survey course?" Almost half (46.3%) the two-year colleges and more than half (51.4%) of the four-year college teachers indicated that they used a single book -- Bradley, Beatty and Long's The American Tradition in Literature. Such

Figure 9

WHO CHOOSES THE TEXT?



heavy use of the text is not merely regional. Nationwide, 44.8% of those surveyed reported using it. What is more, only two other anthologies commanded as much as 10% of the market among regional two-year colleges.-- George McMichael's Anthology of American Literature with 17.1% and Norman Foerster's American Poetry and Prose with a 14.6% share.

V. Philosophy of Teaching

The most telling part of the survey was not statistical. We asked for a brief statement of the teacher's philosophy of teaching American literature. The candid assessments which emerged, revealed three basic attitudes of SAMLA region junior and community college professors toward their work. One group, in pride, pointed to the American literature courses in their schools as being better academically than those of other colleges and universities. This group backed up its claim by appealing to specific educational goals which they employed. A second group maintained that gaining specific knowledge from a survey course was not the point but that gaining a general appreciation for the literature certainly was. A third, small group voiced dissatisfaction with students, the two-year college, American literature, and the world in general.

I thought you would like to hear some comments from each of these groups. One who is jubilant about academic excellence says,"I consider my students geniuses and I make them see and attain within their potentials.... I also guarantee that when they finish my 2nd year course... in American lit, they can surpass ANY undergraduate lit major in any of the top universities -- I CAN, AND THEY DO!!!"

Several people in the second group simply said,"My goal is to 'turn my students on' to their national literary heritage;" or "We teachers of literature need to turn students 'on' not 'off.'" A number, however, carried comments a bit further, relating the content of their courses to what they felt was the uniqueness of the two-year college:

> Since this is a two-year college, I teach the course somewhat differently than I would if it were a junior or senior level class. Although I do emphasize the major writers and their influence on one another, I am still basically concerned with teaching my students how to read and respond to literature and how to communicate their ideas about it verbally and in writing. Thus, I do not insist that the students master the period as a distinct segment of literary history.

The lowered academic expectation is also reflected in a number of comments by others disparaging memorization; but there is also a positive emphasis on experiencing the literature. One professor notes,"I am concerned with the student's being able to connect literary experiences with their own experiences." Another feels that the ability of the literature to draw some reaction is its most important ability: "Only material that elicits a response should be used. It should be used to help students see the conflicts in American culture, the moral ambiguity of life, and the enjoyment of the life of the mind."

A third group finds something very wrong. They vary in what they think is wrong, but a number place the blame squarely on the students. One frustrated teacher writes, "Our college is 65-85% 'non-traditional' students and all of our literature courses are dying. And none too slowly. I more and more feel as if I had to apologize of the Am[erican] Lit. Course [by saying,] 'Sorry kids, this is tough but good for you.'" No complaint is more typical than that of the professor crying, "Most of my students have little to no

background in American lit. Consequently, I run an historical/chronological approach. At present I have three students in American lit, which I find symptomatic of the times; can it make me money or get me a job?"

Conclusions

From our study we can draw a profile of the two-year college in the region in its teaching of American literature. The typical school has a small number of students enrolled in survey courses; and the teachers tend to be traditional in their methods of course organization, conservative in their use of a syllabus. The course at this school contrasts with the one offered in the nearby four-year school in several respects including testing, with the two-year school requiring fewer demonstrations of knowledge from the student; yet in the overall picture, these differences are rather minor. Areas of agreement are much more pronounced. The two schools agree on which values should be stressed and, in spite of a different method of choosing texts, on which texts should be used. If there are differences in the institutional goals of the two schools, they do not show up in the statistics about the American literature offerings.

Comments from teachers at the two-year school show that they are greatly concerned about the image and reputation of the American literature survey and of the school. They themselves do not agree on where the program in American lit stands. Some rank it high, far better than the program at the four-year school. Some say it is good but cannot be compared with the offering at the four-year school because the two have different aims, though those aims are difficult to verbalize. A small group maintains that

lack of student ability or preparation means that the course is not effective at the two-year college. Interestingly, teachers at the senior college show little concern for the image and reputation of their offerings and spend virtually no time in agonizing introspection about the quality of students they deal with. They do, however, how great concern about course content and requirements.

American literature is alive and well in the two-year school. In some places new programs are even being instituted. One respondent to the survey we conducted said that American literature offerings would be available for the first time this fall. If there is a debate among teachers in the two-year college about whether the aims of the courses they offer are or should be different from those at a senior college, it is a debate which has, so far, resulted in few perceptible differences in the courses themselves.